Marriage

Emma Goldman

18 July 1897

Marriage. How much sorrow, misery, humiliation; how many tears and curses; what agony and suffering has this word brought to humanity. From its very birth, up to our present day, men and women grown under the iron yoke of our marriage institution, and there seems to be no relief, no way out of it. At all times, and in all ages, have the suppressed striven to break the chains of mental and physical slavery. After thousands of noble lives have been sacrificed at the stake and on the gallows, and others have perished in prisons, or at the merciless hands of inquisitions, have the ideas of those brave heroes been accomplished. Thus have religious dogmas, feudalism and black slavery been abolished, and new ideas, more progressive, broader and clearer, have come to the front, and again we see poor down trodden humanity fighting for its rights and independence. But the crudest, most tyranical of all institutions - marriage, stands firm as ever, and woe unto those who dare to even doubt its sacredness. Its mere discussion is enough to infuriate not only Christians and conservatives alone, but even Liberals, Freethinkers, and Radicals. What is it that causes all these people to uphold marriage? What makes them cling to this prejudice? (for it is nothing else but prejudice). It is because marriage relations, are the foundation of private property, ergo, the foundation of our cruel and inhuman system. With wealth and superfluity on one side, crime on the other, hence to abolish marriage, means to abolish everything above mentioned. Some progressive people are trying to reform and better our marriage laws. They no longer permit the church to interfere in their matrimonial relations, others even go further, they marry free, that is without the consent of the law, but, nevertheless, this form of marriage is just as binding, just as "sacred", as the old form, because it is not the form or the kind of marriage relation we have, but the thing, the thing itself that is objectionable, hurtful and degrading. It always gives the man the right and power over his wife, not only over her body, but also over her actions, her wishes; in fact, over her whole life. And how can it be otherwise? Behind the relations of any individual man and woman to each other, stands the historical age evolved relations between the two sexes in general, which have led up to the difference in the position and privileges of the two sexes today. Two young people come together, but their relation is largely determined by causes over which they have no control. They know little of each other, society has kept both sexes apart, the boy and the girl have been brought up along different lines. Like Olive Schreiner says in her Story of an African Farm "The boy has been taught to be, the girl to seem." Exactly; the boy is taught to be intelligent, bright, clever, strong, athletic, independent and selfreliant; to develop his natural faculties, to follow his passions and desires. The girl has been taught to

dress, to stand before the looking glass and admire herself, to control her emotions, her passions, her wishes, to hide her mental defects and to combine what little intelligence and ability she has on one point, and that is, the quickest and best way to angle a husband, to get profitably married. And so it has come that the two sexes hardly understand each others nature, that their mental interest and occupations are different. Public opinion separates their rights and duties, their honor and dishonor very strictly from each other. The subject of sex is a sealed book to the girl, because she has been given to understand that it is impure, immoral and indecent to even mention the sex question. To the boy it is a book whose pages have brought him disease and secret vice, and in some cases ruin and death. Among the rich class it has long been out of fashion to fall in love. Men of society marry, after a life of debauchery and lust, to build up their ruined constitution. Others again have lost their capital, in gambling sports or business speculation, and decide that an heiress would be just the thing they need, knowing well, that the marriage tie will in no way hinder them from squandering the income of their wealthy bride. The rich girl having been brought to be practical and sensible, and having been accustomed to live, breathe, eat, smile, walk and dress only according to fashion, holds out her millions to some title, or to a man with a good social standing. She has one consolation, and that is, that society allows more freedom of action to a married woman and should she be disappointed in marriage she will be in a position to gratify her wishes otherwise. We know, the walls of boudoirs and salons are deaf and dumb, and a little pleasure within these walls is no crime.

With the men and women among the working-class, marriage is quite a different thing. Love is not so rare as among the upper class, and very often helps both to endure disappointments and sorrows in life, but even here the majority of marriages, last only for a short while, to be swallowed up in the monotany of the every day life and the struggle for existence. Here also, the workingman marries because he grows tired of a bordinghouse life, and out of a desire to build a home of his own, where he will find his comfort. His main object, therefor, is to find a girl that will make a good cook and housekeeper; one that will look out only for his happiness, for his pleasures; one that will look up to him as her lord, her master, her defender, her supporter; the only ideal worth while living for. Another man hopes that the girl he'll marry will be able to work and help to put away a few cents for rainy days, but after a few months of so called happiness he awakens to the bitter reality that his wife is soon to become a mother, that she can not work, that the expences grow bigger, and that while he before managed to get along with the small earning allowed him by his "kind" master, this earning is not sufficient to support a family.

The girl who has spent her childhood, and part of her womanhood, in the factory, feels her strength leaving her and pictures to herself the dreadful condition of ever having to remain a shopgirl, never certain of her work, she is, therefore, compelled to lookout for a man, a good husband, which means one who can support her, and give her a good home. Both, the man and the girl, marry for the same purpose, with the only exception that the man is not expected to give up his individuality, his name, his independence, whereas, the girl has to sell herself, body and soul, for the pleasure of being someone's wife; hence they do not stand on equal terms, and where there is no equality there can be no harmony. The consequence is that shortly after the first few months, or to make all allowance possible, after the first year, both come to the conclusion that marriage is a failure.

As their conditions grow worse and worse, and with the increase of children the woman grows despondent, miserable, dissatisfied and weak. Her beauty soon leaves her, and from hard work, sleepless nights, worry about the little ones and disagreement and quarrels with her husband,

she soon becomes a physical wreck and curses the moment that made her a poor man's wife. Such a dreary, miserable life is certainly not inclined to maintain love or respect for each other. The man can at least forget his misery in the company of a few friends; he can absorb himself in politics, or he can drown his misfortune in a glass of beer. The woman is chained to the house by a thousand duties; she cannot, like her husband, enjoy some recreation because she either has no means for it, or she is refused the same rights as her husband, by public opinion. She has to carry the cross with her until death, because our marriage laws know of no mercy, unless she wishes to lay bare her married life before the critical eye of Mrs. Grundy, and even then she can only break the chains which tie her to the man she hates if she takes all the blame on her own shoulders, and if she has energy enough to stand before the world disgraced for the rest of her life. How many have the courage to do that? Very few. Only now and then it comes like a flash of lightening that some woman, like the Princess De Chimay, has had pluck enough to break the conventional barriers and follow her heart's desire. But this exception is a wealthy woman, dependent upon no one. The poor woman has to consider her little ones; she is less fortunate than her rich sister, and yet the woman who remains in bondage is called respectable: never mind if her whole life is a long chain of lies, deceit and treachery, she yet dares to look down with disgust upon her sisters who have been forced by society to sell their charms and affections on the street. No matter how poor, how miserable a married woman may be, she will yet think herself above the other, whom she calls a prostitute, who is an outcast, hated and despised by everyone, even those who do not hesitate to buy her embrace, look upon the poor wretch as a necessary evil, and some goody goody people even suggest to confine this evil to one district in New York, in order to "purify" all other districts of the city. What a farce! The reformers might as well demand that all the married inhabitants of New York be driven

out because they certainly do not stand morally higher than the street woman. The sole difference between her and the married woman is, that the one has sold herself into chattel slavery during life, for a home or a title, and the other one sells herself for the length of time she desires; she has the right to choose the man she bestowes her affections upon, whereas the married woman has no right whatsoever; she must submit to the embrace of her lord, no matter how lothsome this embrace may be to her, she must obey his commands; she has to bear him children, even at the cost of her own strength and health; in a word, she prostitutes herself every hour, every day of her life. I can find no other name for the horrid, humiliating and degrading condition of my married sisters than prostitution of the worst kind, with the only exception that the one is legal, the other illegal.

I cannot deal with the few exceptional cases of marriage which are based on love, esteem and respect; these exceptions only verify the rule. But whether legal or illegal, prostitution in any form is unnatural, hurtful and despicable, and I know only too well that the conditions cannot be changed until this infernal system is abolished, but I also know that it is not only the economic dependence of women which has caused her enslavement, but also her ignorance and prejudice, and I also know that it is not only the economic dependence of women which has caused her enslavement, but also her ignorance and prejudice, and I also know that many of my sisters could be made free even now, were it not for our marriage institutions which keep them in ignorance, stupidity and prejudice. I therefore consider it my greatest duty to denounce marriage, not only the old form, but the so-called modern marriage, the idea of taking a wife and housekeeper, the idea of private possession of one sex by the other. I demand the independence of woman; her right

to support herself; to live for herself; to love whomever she pleases, or as many as she pleases. I demand freedom for both sexes, freedom of action, freedom in love and freedom in motherhood.

Do not tell me that all this can only be accomplished under Anarchy; this is entirely wrong. If we want to accomplish Anarchy, we must first have free women at least, those woman who are economically just as independent as their brothers are, and unless we have free women, we cannot have free mothers, and if mothers are not free, we cannot expect the young generation to assist us in the accomplishment of our aim, that is the establishment of an Anarchist society.

To you Freethinkers and Liberals who have abolished one God and created many whom you worship; you Radicals and Socialists, who still send your children to Sunday school, and all those who make concessions to the moral standard of to day; to all of you I say that it is your lack of courage which makes you cling to and uphold marriage, and while you admit its absurdity in theory, you have not the energy to defy public opinion, and to live your own life practically. You prate of equality of the sexes in a future Society, but you think it a necessary evil that the woman should suffer at present. You say women are inferior and weaker, and instead of assisting them to grow stronger you help to keep them in a degraded position. You demand exclusiveness for us, but you love variety and enjoy it whereever you can get a chance.

Marriage, the curse of so many centuries, the cause of jealousy, suicide and crime, must be abolished if we wish the young generation to grow to healthy, strong and free men and women.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright

Emma Goldman
Marriage
18 July 1897

https://jwa.org/media/goldmans-first-published-writing-on-subject-of-marriage-0

theanarchistlibrary.org